

**VOCATION**  
TO THE  
**RELIGIOUS STATE**

TAKEN FROM THE  
WRITINGS OF  
**ST. ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI**

BY THE  
**REV. CORNELIUS J. WARREN, C. SS. R.**



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## VOCATION TO THE RELIGIOUS STATE

*(From the Works of St. Alphonsus)*

### I.

#### **Necessity of Conforming to the Designs of God in the Choice of a State of Life**

It is evident that our eternal salvation depends principally upon the choice of our state of life. Father Granada calls this choice, the main wheel of our whole existence. If the principal wheel of a clock is deranged the whole clock is out of order. So it is with the business of our salvation; a mistake with regard to our state of life, says St. Gregory of Naziansen, will disturb our whole career.

If then, we wish to secure our eternal salvation, we must embrace that state of life to which God calls us, and in which alone, God prepares the efficacious means, necessary for salvation. St. Cyprian says: "The grace of the Holy Spirit is given according to the order of God, and not in

accordance with our own will.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore St. Paul writes: “Everyone hath his proper gift from God.”<sup>2</sup> This means, as Cornelius a Lapide explains, that God gives to every one his vocation, and chooses the state in which He wills him to be saved. “Whom He predestinated, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified . . . . and them He also glorified.”<sup>3</sup>

There are many in the world to-day who give this doctrine of vocation little thought or consideration. They think it a matter of indifference whether they live in the state to which God calls them, or in that which they choose themselves. As a result we find so many leading wicked lives, and hurrying along the road to destruction.

Where there is question of eternal life the matter of vocation is of vital importance. He who disturbs the order of Divine Providence and breaks the chain of graces will not be saved. St. Augustine says to such a one: “Thou runnest well, but out of the way”, that is to say, out of the way to which God has called you to

<sup>1</sup>De Sing. Cler.: <sup>2</sup>I. Cor. 7, 7; <sup>3</sup>Rom. 8, 30.

attain your salvation. The Lord does not accept sacrifices that come merely from one's inclination, “But to Cain and his offerings, He had no respect.”<sup>1</sup> He even threatens with chastisement those who, deaf to His call, turn their backs on Him to follow their own whims and caprice. “Woe to you, apostate children,” He says by the lips of Isaias 30, 1, “that you would take counsel, and not from me and would begin a web and not by my spirit.”

God wills that all men should be saved but not in the same way. As in heaven He has distinguished different degrees of glory, so on earth He has established different states of life, as so many different ways of gaining heaven. To enter into any state of life, a divine vocation is necessary; for without such a vocation it is, if not impossible, at least most difficult to fulfill the obligation of our state, and obtain salvation. The reason of this is evident; for it is God Who in the order of His Providence assigns to each one of us his state of life, and afterwards provides us

<sup>1</sup>Gen. 4, 5.

with the graces and the help suitable to the state to which He calls us.

It is evident then that the great and only affair which ought to preoccupy the minds of young persons of both sexes is to know the designs of God relative to the state of life which they are to embrace, and to obtain from Him the strength to conform to it.

### **Vocation to the Religious State**

The divine call to a more perfect life is undoubtedly a special grace, and a very great grace which God does not give to everyone. Consequently He has good reason to be displeased with those who despise it. Would a prince not be justly offended, if he called a vassal to serve him in his very palace, and the vassal would refuse to obey? And will God not resent such conduct on the part of His subjects? He does resent it, and even threatens such subjects with the words: "Woe to him that gainsayeth his maker."<sup>1</sup> Even in this life, the chastisement of the disobedient will be felt in the unrest and disquiet they feel, for Job says: "Who hath resisted Him and hath had peace?"<sup>2</sup> Deprived of those

<sup>1</sup>Isa. 45, 9; <sup>2</sup>Job 9, 4.

abundant and efficacious helps necessary for a good life, they will with great difficulty, says Habert, be able to work out their salvation. "In the body of the Church," says the learned author, "he will be like a member of the human body, out of place. It may be able to perform its functions, but only with difficulty and in an awkward manner." We find the same teaching in the writings of St. Bernard and St. Leo. The Emperor Maurice had published an edict forbidding soldiers to become religious. St. Gregory wrote to the Emperor, saying that this law was unjust for it closed the gates of paradise to many who would save their souls in religious life, but lose them in the world.

Lancicius relates a remarkable case. In the Roman College there was once a very talented youth. Whilst making the spiritual exercises he asked his director whether it was a sin not to correspond with a vocation to the religious life. The director replied that in itself it was not a grievous sin, since this is a thing of counsel and not of precept, but that one would expose one's

salvation to great danger as had happened to many others whose end was very sad.

The young man failed to profit by the advice. Though convinced that he had a vocation, he neglected to follow the call of God. He went to Macerata to continue his studies. Here he began to neglect prayer and Holy Communion, and finally gave himself up to a wicked life. One night on returning from the house of an accomplice of his crimes, he was mortally wounded by a jealous rival. A priest was summoned but before he arrived the unfortunate youth was dead.

Penamonti relates in his treatise on vocation that a certain novice who had resolved to leave his community was startled by a strange vision. He saw Christ sitting on a throne, and giving an order that his name be blotted out of the book of life. He was so terrified by this vision that he resolved to persevere in his vocation.

How many will be found condemned on judgment day for not having followed their vocation! They are rebels to the divine light for the Holy Ghost says: "They

have been rebellious to the light, they have not known his ways."<sup>1</sup> Because they would not walk in the way shown them by the Lord, they shall walk without light in that chosen by their own caprice. "I called and you refused . . . . you have despised my counsel . . . . They shall call upon me and I shall not hear; they shall rise in the morning and shall not find me."<sup>2</sup>

### **We Must Obey Without Delay**

When God calls one to a more perfect state, He expects a prompt obedience to His call. Otherwise such a one will deserve the reproach that our Lord administered to the young man spoken of in the Gospel. "I will follow Thee, Lord," said the young man, "but let me first take my leave of them that are at my house." And Jesus replied: "No man putting his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."<sup>1</sup>

The lights which God gives are transient, not permanent gifts. Wherefore St. Thomas says that the vocation of God to a

<sup>1</sup>Ps. 94, 11. <sup>2</sup>Prov. 1, 28.

<sup>1</sup>Luk. 9, 61.

more perfect life ought to be followed as promptly as possible. In his summary he proposes the question, whether it is praiseworthy to enter religion without having asked the counsel of many, and without long deliberation? He answers in the affirmative saying that counsel and deliberation are necessary in doubtful things, but not in this matter which is certainly good. Jesus Christ has counselled it in the Gospel, for the religious state comprehends most of the counsels of Christ. How singular it is that when there is question of leading a more perfect life, free from the dangers of the world, people say they must deliberate a long time in order to find out whether the vocation comes from God or the devil. But how differently they talk and act when there is an opportunity to gain some earthly honor or preferment.

St. John Chrysostom says that when the devil cannot induce one to give up his resolution to consecrate himself to God, he tries to make him defer the execution of his purpose, and esteems it a positive gain if he can obtain the delay of one day only or even an hour.

This is the advice of St. Jerome to those who are called to quit the world: "Make haste, I beseech you, and rather cut than loosen the cord by which your bark is fastened to the land." The saint wishes to say: a man in a boat that is sinking will cut the rope rather than wait to loosen it. So he that is in the midst of a dangerous world should endeavor to leave it as quickly as possible. Listen to what St. Francis de Sales has to say. "To have a sign of a true vocation, it is not necessary that it be a matter of feeling." To know whether God calls you to the religious life you need not expect that God Himself will appear to you or send an angel from heaven to make known His will. Nor is it necessary that a dozen or more learned men examine to see if the vocation should be followed or not. It is necessary, however, to correspond with the first movement of the inspiration and to cultivate it. Nor does it matter much, from what source the inspiration comes. The Lord makes use of many means to call His servants. Sometimes it is a sermon; at other times a good book. Some, as St. Anthony and St.

Francis, were called when hearing the words of the Gospel. Others were moved to leave the world and enter religion by the troubles and afflictions they had to endure. Persons who come to God, through disgust for the world, sometimes become greater saints than those who enter religion with a more apparent vocation, because they give themselves to God with their whole heart and soul. Father Platus tells of a nobleman who was riding a fine horse one day, and trying his best to appear to advantage before those who saw him. He was suddenly thrown from the horse, and landed in a mud puddle from which he arose badly besmeared. He was so filled with confusion that he resolved then and there to leave the world. "Treacherous world," he said, "thou hast mocked me, but I will mock thee. Thou hast played me a game. I will play thee another. I will have no more peace with thee, and now I resolve to forsake thee and become a friar." And, in fact, he became a religious and led a holy life.

### **Means to Preserve a Religious Vocation**

Circumstances sometimes prevent one who is called to religious life from immediately following his vocation. In such a case he ought to be exceedingly careful to guard so precious a jewel. This he can do best by secrecy, prayer and recollection. As a rule it is prudent to keep one's vocation secret from everybody except one's spiritual Father. Others would be apt to say that he could serve God in the world as well if not better than in religious life. Without doubt, one who is not called to religious life may serve God in every place; but one who is called, and prefers to remain in the world, will as I have said above find it extremely difficult to serve God and lead a good life.

Nor is it necessary to mention the matter to parents, unless one is certain that one has nothing but encouragement to expect from them. In this respect, all things being equal, children are not bound to obey their parents when they seek to prevent them from obeying the call of God. The Council of Toledo says: "It shall be lawful for children to take upon them-



selves the yoke of religious observance, whether it be with the consent of their parents, or only the wish of their own hearts."<sup>1</sup> The same is prescribed by the Council of Tribur, and taught by St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Bernard, St. Thomas and St. John Chrysostom. The last mentioned saint says: "When parents stand in the way in spiritual things, they ought not even to be recognized."<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas says: "Servants are not bound to obey their masters, nor children their parents with regard to contracting matrimony, preserving virginity and such like things."<sup>3</sup> In his treatise on religious vocation, Father Penamonti thinks with Sanchez, Commenchio and others, that a child when contemplating marriage is bound to take counsel of his parents because in such matters they have more experience than the young. But, with regard to religious vocation, he says, a child is not bound to take counsel of his parents, because in this matter they have had no experience, and not unfrequently they are hostile to the wishes or intention of the

<sup>1</sup>Cap. 6; <sup>2</sup>In Jo. hom. 81; <sup>3</sup>2, 2, q. 104.

child. St. Thomas says: "Frequently our friends according to the flesh are opposed to our spiritual good."<sup>1</sup>

St. Peter of Alcantara found it necessary to flee from the home of his mother, when he desired to enter the monastery and become a religious. In his flight he came to a river which he feared would hinder his progress. He recommended himself to God and in an instant found himself transported to the other side of the river.

St. Stanislaus Kostka, we are told, fled from home without his father's leave. His brother took a carriage and set out after him in great haste. When about to overtake the young saint, the horses that drew the carriage refused, in spite of violent urging, to go a step further. They turned in the opposite direction, and ran at full speed.

Blessed Oringa of Waldrano in Tuscany, though against her wish, was promised in marriage to a young man. She fled from the home of her parents in order to consecrate herself to God. Coming to the river Arno, she prayed to God for help. In an

<sup>1</sup>2, 2, q. 189.

instant the water divided and formed two walls as it were of crystal, allowing her to pass between them without even wetting her feet.

"A man's enemies shall be those of his household," says Holy Scripture. It sometimes happens that relatives, and even fathers and mothers though endowed with piety, nevertheless oppose the efforts of children to give themselves to God. Self interest and misguided passion blind such people, and under various pretexts they do not scruple to thwart the designs of God.

In the life of Father Paul Segneri the younger, we read that his mother though much given to prayer, left no means untried to prevent her son from entering the religious state. Likewise in the life of Mgr. Cavalieri, Bishop of Troja, we find that his father, a man of great piety, refused to allow him to enter the Congregation of Pius Workers and even went so far as to bring a suit against him in the ecclesiastical court.

It would seem then that under no circumstances does the evil spirit use more formidable weapons than when there is

question of preventing those who are called to the religious state, from carrying out their resolution.

NOTE. "The grace of a religious vocation is not only a signal favor for him who receives it, but it is also a great blessing for the whole family. Christian parents should wish it for their children as the most precious good, by giving thanks to God if He deigns to grant it, and should hasten to offer Him with their whole heart, the happy sacrifice that He requires of them. What may they not expect from Him Who rewards so liberally the least action that we perform out of love for Him? On the other hand, to oppose a vocation is to oppose God. What would be the consequence of such an attempt?

Happily there are parents who with perfect submission to the will of God, have the wisdom not to oppose the happiness of their children, but give them every liberty in reference to their vocation. Such parents acquire great merit in the sight of God.

St. Alphonsus does not wish that young people should act thoughtlessly in a matter as important as it is delicate. He counsels them to consult a prudent director who will take care to weigh maturely before God all the circumstances, and to examine, among other things, whether the parents would not have some serious reason to allege: for instance, the grave necessity in which they find themselves, etc. Thus all danger of taking a rash step is averted."—Ed.

### Excellence of Virginity

"They shall be like the angels of God in heaven,"<sup>1</sup> says our Blessed Lord, when speaking of those who lead a virginal life. Baronius relates that when a holy virgin named Georgia died, a flock of doves was seen to hover around her. When the body was brought to the church, they rested on the roof directly above the corpse and remained there until the body was interred. These doves were thought to be angels who accompanied the virginal body.

When St. Agnes was asked to marry the son of the Prefect of Rome, she replied: "I have a much more advantageous marriage in view." She meant of course her espousal to Christ by the vow of virginity. When St. Domitilla was urged to marry Count Aurelian, nephew of the Emperor Domitian, the saint replied: If a maiden had to choose between a monarch and a clown, whose hand should she accept? Should I marry Aurelian I should be rejecting the hand of the Monarch of heaven and earth. I will not do so. In consequence of her choice she was burned alive

<sup>1</sup>Matth. 22, 30

by order of her rejected suitor, and won thereby the crown of martyrdom as well as that of virginity.

"He feedeth among lilies."<sup>2</sup> What is meant by lilies if not those devout maidens who consecrate their virginity to Jesus Christ. Theologians tell us that the Blessed Mother would have consented to forego the dignity of Mother of God, if it were to be at the expense of her virginity.

### Means to Preserve Virginal Purity

We read in the Gospel that the kingdom of heaven is likened unto virgins. But what kind of virgins? Not foolish virgins to be sure but the wise. The wise virgins were admitted to the nuptials but the door was shut in the face of the foolish.

The spouses of Christ will follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. This means, according to St. Augustine, that they imitate the Lamb of God in body and mind. What are the means they employ?

1. The first of these means is **mental prayer**.

To pray, it is not necessary to be always on bended knee, or in church or even in

<sup>2</sup>Cant. 2, 16.

some quiet corner at home, though it is advisable when possible to adopt a reverend attitude in some place where you are not exposed to distractions. You can pray while at work; you can pray while walking the street in any place, under all circumstances, by raising your mind to God, and thinking of the Passion of Christ or any other pious subject.

2. The second means is the **frequentation of confession and Communion**. It is very important to select a prudent confessor and to obey his instructions. Otherwise one is not likely to make progress on the path of virtue. Frequent and fervent Communion is the best means of preserving fidelity to Christ. The Immaculate Lamb is the guardian of virginity and holiness of life. The Blessed Eucharist is "the corn of the elect and wine springing forth virgins."<sup>1</sup> But one must hunger for the Bread of heaven to taste its sweetness and be supernaturally nourished. "This is the living bread come down from heaven which if any man eat he shall not die."

<sup>1</sup>Lact. 9, 17

3. The third means of preserving virginal purity is to **foster a love for retirement and prudent reserve**. "As the lily among the thorns, so is my beloved amongst the daughters."<sup>2</sup> It were rash to expect to remain untarnished and undefiled, while frequenting the society of worldlings and taking part in their conversations and amusements. Virginal purity can be preserved only amid the thorns of mortification and self denial. A lack of modesty and cautious reserve will cause the lily of virtue to wilt.

4. The fourth means consists in the **mortification of the senses**. St. Basil says: "A virgin should not be immodest in any respect, in eyes or ears, in tongue or touch, and still less in mind." Unless we learn to curb our senses they will inevitably lead us to serious indiscretions. Acts of mortification will be necessary but only with the consent of one's confessor. "Virgins," we are told, "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." But his path is not always strewn with roses; He frequently encoun-

<sup>2</sup>Cant. 2, 2.

ters thorns. He has left blood stained footsteps along the road to Calvary.

5. Finally in order to persevere in this holy life, it is necessary to **recommend yourself constantly to the Blessed Mother of God, the Queen of Virgins.** She is the mediatrix who brings virgins to espouse her Divine Son. "After her shall virgins be brought to the King."<sup>1</sup> It is she too who enables them to remain faithful to their heavenly espousals.

In conclusion, therefore, if you have reason to believe you are favored by God with a religious vocation, do not neglect to thank the dear Lord for this inestimable grace, the greatest after that of baptism. Resolve to give yourself wholly to the Spouse of virginal souls. He has given Himself unreservedly to you; why should you not give yourself to Him to serve Whom is to reign. Say with the Apostle: "What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or danger or nakedness or the sword? I am sure that neither life nor death, nor angels

<sup>1</sup>Ps. 44, 15.

nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come, nor might nor height nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Rom. 8, 35.

